

Miroslav Válek: Three Stages of Canonicity¹

Miroslav Válek: trys kanoniškumo pakopos

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Abstract: The article focuses on the seminal Slovak poet Miroslav Válek (1927–1991) and his place in the Slovak literary canon. It reconstructs Válek’s literary trajectory, from being a poet of individualist and intimate verse who entered Slovak literature during the political thaw and liberalisation, as an important voice of the generation, to a poet who inclined towards long associative poems with political overtones, culminating in his controversial book-length poem in the 1970s, during his no less controversial time as minister of culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic. Based on the critical reception and publishing history of Válek’s poetry, the paper pays attention to shifts and ambiguities in the poet’s position in both the socialist and post-socialist literary canons. Despite certain fluctuations, the basis of his image remains the same, rooted in his own poetic programme, which coincided with the preferred image of a poet’s work at the time: Válek was and remains both a poet and a politician, a poet of inner turmoil, and a poet of social and political being. The difference the paper attempts to describe is that the socialist literary canon did not differentiate between these extremes (at least in official literary criticism), whereas the Slovak post-socialist canon, which is generally sceptical towards political tones in art, makes the distinction clearly.

Keywords: Miroslav Válek, engagement, socialist literature, Normalisation, 20th-century Slovak poetry.

- 1 This study is part of project No VEGA 2/0021/23 ‘Normalisation in Slovak Literature: Mechanisms, Actors, Production’, funded by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences, and carried out at the Institute of Slovak Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Received: 04/06/2023. **Accepted:** 09/04/2024.

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Anotacija: Straipsnyje nagrinėjama įtakingo slovakų poeto Miroslavo Váleko (1927–1991) vieta nacionaliniame literatūros kanone. Rekonstruojama Váleko literatūrinė trajektorija: nuo individualistinės, intymiosios lyrikos kūrėjo, kuris į slovakų literatūrą įžengė politinio atšilimo ir liberalizacijos laikotarpiu, tapdamas reikšmingu savo kartos balsu; poeto, rašančio ilgus asociatyvius eilėraščius su politiniu atspalviu, kurių kulminacija tapo 8-ajame dešimtmetyje atskira knyga išleista kontroversiška poema; iki ne mažiau kontroversiško Slovakijos Socialistinės Respublikos kultūros ministro posto. Remiantis Váleko poezijos kritine recepcija ir leidybos istorija, nagrinėjama poeto pozicijos ambivalencija ir kaita socialistinės ir posocialistinės literatūros kanone. Nepaisant tam tikrų svyravimų, ankstyvojoje poetinėje programoje susikurtas rašytojo įvaizdis, sutapęs su tuo metu pageidaujamu poeto vaizdiniu, išsilaikė iki dabar. Válekas buvo ir tebėra poetas ir politikas: vidinės sumaišties kamuojamas kūrėjas ir socialinės bei politinės pakraipos autorius. Straipsnyje išryškintas skirtumas tarp socialistinio estetinio kanono, kuriame šiedu vaidmenys darniai sugyveno (bent jau oficialioje literatūros kritikoje), ir posocialistinio slovakų kanono, kuriam būdingas skeptiškas politinių meno apraiškų vertinimas.

Raktažodžiai: Miroslav Válek, angažuotė, socialistinė literatūra, Normalizacijos laikotarpis, XX a. slovakų poezija.

On the socialist canon

The role of the canon in the system of Socialist Realism has been most profoundly described by Katerina Clark as a doctrine determined by certain texts with a strong normative and directive aspect (Clark 1981). The canonical system can be considered a foundation stone of Socialist Realism, based on its intention to control power, on the symbiosis of poetics and politics, as a construct delimited by communist teleology which accentuates historicism (Bílik 2015). This is true, with minor alterations over time, for the theoretical background of socialist literature as a phenomenon that was institutionally cultivated for four decades in communist Czechoslovakia, most prominently during the orthodox eras of the 1950s and the early 1970s.

Establishing the Slovak socialist literary canon would entail reading through encyclopaedias, textbooks and school curricula of the period, as well as the period's output of literary critics attached to Marxist-Leninist thought and doctrine. A great number of discussions on Socialist Realism and socialist literature in Slovakia indicate that it was largely a work in progress. Canonical texts were 'imported' from the past, or plainly said, the Slovak Romantic and

Realist classics were installed in the socialist context with the intention to describe them as a ‘progressive tradition’ (Bílik 2015: 37). In these respects, the Socialist Realist canon, as it functioned in Slovakia, was an entirely institutional system on two levels: the canon of rules in the form of often vaguely outlined official directives and instructions, and the canon of actual exemplary texts. While the aforementioned ‘progressive tradition’ in the textual canon remained more or less stable, a larger issue was the ‘contemporary’ canon of Socialist Realism. It was closely tied to non-literary social and political developments: its shape and content were often debated and prone to shifts due to the changing political climate, namely during the post-Stalin thaw, the period of liberalisation in the 1960s, and the process of Normalisation that started after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies and lasted until the mid-1970s.

It would be possible to name several authors whose work belonged to the official canon of socialist literature, but who remained relevant after the fall of the socialist regime and after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Miroslav Válek would certainly be a name still bound to stir controversy thanks to the tension between his undoubtedly valuable poetry and his political activities during the Normalisation. As his works were at the forefront of Slovak literature for decades, observing their reception and canonical status also means observing the situation of Slovak literature and, to a certain extent, society in the second half of the 20th century.

The person

Miroslav Válek (1927–1991) was a poet who entered Slovak literature to become one of the pioneers of progressive, neo-Modernist poetry in the second half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1960s at the time of relative creative and social freedom. His writing career started in 1942 in Catholic literary magazines, and by 1951, as literary magazines were either cancelled or nationalised and rebranded to fit the aims of the communist regime, Válek stopped publishing poetry altogether. He resurfaced in literary magazines in 1956 when the political thaw started, and later debuted with the collection of poems *Dotyky* (Contacts,² 1959). Válek

2 The titles of the four books are taken from translations by Ewald Osers (Válek 1996).

went on to publish three more books in the 1960s: *Príťažlivosť* (Attraction, 1961), *Nepokoj* (Unrest, 1963) and *Milovanie v husej koži* (Lovemaking with Goosebumps, 1965), gradually inclining towards lengthy, experimental and polythematic poems, sometimes resembling epic poems.

In 1969, after a brief time as head of the Slovak Writer's Union, Válek accepted the position of minister of culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic, which he held until 1988, and simultaneously became a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia, a role which would grant him actual political power, instead of being a mere ministerial bureaucrat. He became infamous for overseeing the policy of Normalisation in Slovak culture, dictated by the strictly political and propagandist document *Poučení z krízového vývoje ve straně a společnosti po XIII. sjezdu KSČ* (Lessons from the Crisis Development in the Party and Society after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1970). His efforts at individual and social artistic synthesis, as it was usually called at the time, peaked with the idiosyncratic book-length poem *Slovo* (The Word, 1976), ominously dedicated to the Communist Party, which was published at the end of 1976 when Normalisation processes in culture such as purges in the party (Bren 2010: 35–60) and artists' unions and self-criticism had already taken place. At around the same time, Válek published a collection of love sonnets *Z vody* (From Water, a play on the word *zvody* meaning temptation, 1977) in a spiritual return to his roots.

While Válek appeared in the Slovak mass media in the 1960s, his presence in cultural and public life changed radically in the 1970s. Aside from a staggering number of editions of his work, his poetry was published in a wide range of media: dailies, calendars, magazines for women on practical and political matters, magazines on various forms of art, magazines for soldiers, teachers, young pioneers and agricultural workers, and regional newspapers. Moreover, a good portion of his work was broadcast on radio and television, and released on vinyl as well. However, most of his new written output at this point consisted of bureaucratically rigid and sterile articles on cultural policy written from the position and perspective of an undisputed authority, as were most of the interviews he gave. He would often appear in the media as a cultural leader, a political representative, handing out awards (or accepting them), travelling to socialist countries, discussing and relating cultural policy, and encouraging artists to work for the national and socialist cause. His seminal translations of

mainly Russian and French poetry represented a sort of potent creative output that seemed to be largely untouched by his political activities.

Válek's place in Slovak literature is undeniable, as is evidenced by dictionaries, encyclopaedias, textbooks and school curricula, and by resurfacing discussions on the value and moral dimensions of his life and work. Its reception is often, either deliberately or instinctively, divided into two 'stages', prevalent even in today's literary criticism and research. The first accentuates Válek as a poet, and tends to ignore or downplay his political activities, and even his politically charged works. The second stage emphasises his role as a politician and a political poet. The third stage, the post-socialist one, would naturally have to be delimited against the two others. It would have to challenge and rewrite them, providing a more complete image of Válek as a person of various facets that complement rather than contradict each other.

A poet of inner turmoil

Válek's debut book *Dotyky* was a sensation: it is now considered an important deviation from 1950s Socialist Realist writing, together with the poetry book *Až dozrieme* (When We Grow Mature, 1956) by Milan Rúfus. Rúfus and Válek (and a few others that followed) spearheaded the wave of a departure from a rigid, collectivist and conservative lyric towards open, individualist, progressive, neo-avant-garde and well-crafted poetry (Matejov 2006). Válek's debut was lauded in various emphatic ways, for example, as 'a victory of the author, a serious word to think for young Slovak poetry, and a serious word of Slovak poetry' (Gáfrik 1960: 115). It contains what is generally regarded as Válek's best, intimate lyric: it is, in fact, in general terms, poetry of contact with 'incomprehensible matters', poetry of the irrationality of love life and of the existential need for interpersonal contact (Zambor 2013: 12). Before his fourth book was published, he had already established himself as one of the decade's central writers. His works were republished several times in editions that came to be accepted as canonical: a collection of the first three books came out quite early, in 1964, then once again under the title 'books of unrest' in 1967, and finally as the customary four-piece in 1971, with which the sobriquet is associated to this day.

Válek's lyric of melancholy, tragedy and alienation was published in a situation when Slovak literature faced post-Stalinist dilemmas, amid the so-called 'right to sorrow', an interest in the inner life of contemporary (mostly young) people accentuating the gloomy and bleak sides of existence. Authors, critics and cultural policymakers attempted to make sense of the literary situation, moving away from rigid Socialist Realist writing, but with no concrete vision of the 'new socialist literature', a situation of re-configuration or even re-creation of the canon. The debate on the 'right to sadness' relating to Rúfus took place in 1957 in several issues of the seminal literary magazine *Mladá tvorba* (Works of Youth, 1956–1970), of which Válek was a long-time editor. Suffice it to say that the polemic demonstrated hot issues in poetry: to some, the book's conservatism, traditionalism and claim to timelessness were irrelevant to the 'socialist present'. The polemic itself did not initiate new forms of poetry or artistic programmes, and only seemed to contribute to the stricter delimitation of 'socially engaged' poetry against the 'tragic and pessimistic' mode of writing (Petřík 1980: 281–282), a trend continuing throughout the 1960s.

However, it is not entirely true for Válek, who continued his poetic programme by steadily evolving towards existentialism and nihilism, writing more intricate and labyrinthine poems, with a certain social and political agenda. In 1964, Válek took part in a debate on alienation in socialist society and literature, a concept he readily embraced as possible, while calling poetry a means of one's self-determination and a search for meaning (*Dialógy* 1964). These views culminated in his fourth poetry book *Milovanie v husej koži*. In 1966, it was the subject of a heated polemic between two generational critics, Milan Hamada (who embraced Válek's previous work in the debate on alienation and who started the polemic with a review entitled 'Dispute with the Poet') and Stanislav Šmatlák, and also with several other critics voicing their opinions. The debate even resonated in the Czech part of the republic. Their exchange of opinions is generally seen as a crucial moment, not only in Válek's literary trajectory, but also in the careers of the two critics, and in Slovak literature as a whole. Retrospectively, it anticipated the schism in the literary field that would take place in a few years. Hamada, who was strongly opposed to Válek's 'nihilistic gesture', with his own view of poetry as a means of providing beauty and hope in the face of nothingness, would become socially marginalised in the next two decades. Šmatlák, acclaimed Válek's work as an ironic shedding of illusions and

a call for a traditional humanist approach to life, and would become a prominent literary historian, and in essence the ideologue of the official narrative of Slovak literary history (Matejov 2015). To sum up, *Milovanie v husej koži* shows a visible rift in Válek's poetry: on one hand it is a brutal expression of, in the existentialist terminology used to describe the book at the time, a 'gaze into the void', on the other hand Válek fills the void with subtle socialist theses in the form of socially engaged verse.

Válek's socially engaged poetry as the high socialist canon

Slovo was received with unanimous praise: every major literary magazine and newspaper published some sort of 'review',³ overly enthusiastic texts that showered the book and its author with praise. Many were quite repetitive in their praise, pointing out mostly Válek's artistry or his engagement with contemporary topics. As one of the critics asserted, *Slovo* was the peak of socialist poetry (a common denominator of almost all the reflections on the book) that condensed all the basal topics of socialist lyrics: patriotism, admiration for the working people, a belief in the meaning of their work, admiration for one's mother tongue, loyalty to the Communist Party, and the positive impact of the Soviet reality (Marčok 1981). Other reviewers would generally not digress far from such views. The book's release was an event (or, should we say, *the* event) of the utmost importance: it came out shortly before Válek's 50th birthday, when he was also awarded the honourable title of National Artist, the highest artistic state accolade possible.

Until the collapse of the so-called 'real socialist' regime, *Slovo* would, at least on the surface level of official literary culture, remain situated in Slovak literature as the highest canon. Officially mandated 'histories' of Slovak literature presented it in superlatives as a definitive, unique and modern Slovak lyrical book of unprecedented value (Števček 1984: 688–689). The book's canonicity was best manifested in a lively way by Šmatlák: his own panoramic overview of Slovak literature *Dejiny slovenskej literatúry* (A History of Slovak Literature, 1988) closes with a description of *Slovo* as an extraordinary phenomenon that

3 Válek's personal bibliography proves helpful in navigating the large amount of pre-1989 material relating to his work and persona; see Maňovčík 1988.

dialectically synthesised Válek's artistic and life experience with his *zeitgeist* (Šmatlák 1988: 580). In this respect, *Slovo* was often mentioned at the time as a work that sparked new impulses for Slovak literature, and once again re-configured the canon of socialist literature. Its influence was particularly palpable as an example of a 'civic', 'engaged' or 'political' lyric, broadly put under the umbrella term of socially engaged poetry. It is no wonder: Válek's expansive, polythematic and polyphonic social lyric probably inspired (or subtly directed) many younger authors to create a politically engaged, pamphletic lyric commenting on contemporary events. It is also no wonder that Šmatlák became Válek's closest, canonical reader, and his most frequent editor: he analysed and evaluated Válek's work as gradually developing towards an idiosyncratic poetic form by devoting special attention to his socially engaged verse, viewing *Slovo* in dialectical theoretical fashion as both a rupture and a continuation of the poet's previous efforts (Šmatlák 1983: 118).

Šmatlák repeatedly traced the social dimensions of Válek's poetry to the poet's seminal article and something of a manifesto 'Cesty poézie' (Directions of Poetry), published in 1958. It provides Válek's theoretical, emphatic view of the direction of post-Socialist Realism poetry, and echoes the atmosphere of the aforementioned debate on sorrow: according to him, the new poetry would come from the streets, it would reflect individual struggles and everyday life, all while belonging to socialist society and remaining realist (Válek 1958). Válek never rejected the underlying philosophy of Marxism and communism. His concept of poetry, as a synthesis of individual struggles and social matters, of a pessimistic history (and present) and an optimistic future, was more or less stable throughout his later work, as he affirmed in the debate on alienation: 'I do not see the distinction between political and apolitical poetry at this point. I think the topic, especially in poetry, is not decisive. The topic is merely an occasion for poets to say what they want to say, if they can manage it. All good poems are political in this sense' (Dialogy 1964). Later, he would openly accentuate this view in conjunction with the official cultural politics of Normalisation as the minister of culture.

With *Slovo*, Válek entered the second stage of his career, becoming a canonical and chiefly socialist political poet. His works would fit the premise that the more distinct the work is from one canon in both formal and thematic respects, the greater the potential to enter another (Rédey 2015: 12). On one

hand, his earlier poetry delimited itself against rigid Socialist Realism writing to inspire a plethora of young authors that today comprise the valuable poetic canon of the 1960s, on the other hand, *Slovo* would, on various levels, reject the freely and spontaneously created canon of the 'liberal' 1960s, and would serve as a foundation stone for a new instructive canon. Considering the decisive importance that genre may have in creating a work's canonical value (Fowler 1979), it is safe to say that the genre of a long poem (*poéma* in Slovak, from French *poème*) played an integral part in the Slovak literary canon of the 1970s and 1980s. To illustrate the role *Slovo* played at this time, at the Third Congress of Slovak Writers in 1977, organised as a platform to summarise the results of Normalisation and consolidated culture, the chairman of the Slovak Writers' Union opened the event with a speech that quoted several lines from the book in an instructive expression of 'not only the function of the mother tongue as a poetic instrument, but as a social phenomenon as well' (Plávka 1978: 10).

Rethinking Válek's place in the canon

After 1989, the political establishment changed into a liberal democracy, and in 1993 the Republic of Czechoslovakia was dissolved. Regarding literature, suffice it to say that the literary field was radically reorganised: most importantly, the collective principle was replaced by a personalised creative principle, determined by individual freedom and accelerating postmodernist development (Šrank 2013). The literary scholar Peter Zajac aptly called this transformation of the Slovak literary situation 'an obstructed plurality' (Zajac 1999: 76), based on the schism of the literary field into state-guaranteed national literature rooted in mechanisms typically seen as canonical (writer's organisations, publishers, magazines, school education, prizes, museums, national monuments, archives) and independent progressive literature, functioning mostly from international grants, foundations and private patronage. The peculiarities of this schism could be illustrated in Válek's work as well: the first post-1989 book of his selected poems was published by an independent publishing house, but with state funding (Válek 1995); the second, the only English translations of Válek (Válek 1996), was published by an independent Slovak publishing house in cooperation with an English publisher, and was funded by the Open Society

Fund, a subsidy from a state institution, and undisclosed support from a company producing refined copper. This is the situation in which Válek's work was finally to be evaluated in its many aspects and problems: the third stage of explaining his creative trajectory.

In his article on the 1990s Slovak literary field, Zajac mentions Válek briefly as one of the pre-1989 authors whose work was dramatically struck by the reconfiguration of values, in his case by the rebuttal of the values of his ideologically charged writing and activities of the 1970s and 1980s. His reception in the 1990s is marked heavily by such a sentiment. The poet's death in 1991 attracted massive attention: a large number of obituaries and commemorations were published. The reactions to his death anticipated his post-socialist reception and his later place within the canon of Slovak literature. Newspapers and magazines were once again flooded with articles about him, written by his former colleagues, peers and younger followers. Many respectfully acknowledged him as a seminal poet, and avoided a confrontation with his political past, or at most recounted its positive impact on culture. Others pointed out his problematic status as a politician responsible for orchestrating the cultural policy of Normalisation that cost many their jobs, artistic careers or dignity. Some recognised Válek's status as ambiguous at the time, expressing the hope that he would be properly evaluated in the future. There were more important issues in literature and society in the 1990s to reflect on: the problem of Válek's place in the canon was not felt as being urgent at all. However, conservative and nationalist magazines would commemorate him from time to time: for example, the anniversary of his birthday in 1997 became an occasion for several of his former colleagues once again to apologetically remember him in a positive light, maintaining the sentiment of his self-sacrifice for the greater good. The issue of his significance in the new post-communist era is illustrated well in histories published after 1989. One that was intended as a continuation of Šmatlák's history holds Válek in high regard, and sympathetically explains his motivation for writing *Slovo* (Marčok 2004: 133–134) as an anxiety-driven attempt to express concerns over the legitimacy and functionality of the socialist project. Another also presents Válek as a seminal 20th-century poet, but disqualifies *Slovo* in his creative trajectory as a rupture that conformed to totalitarian communist ideology (Hochel 2009: 337). New editions of Šmatlák's history do not include the chapter on contemporary poetry that contained Válek at all.

Shortly after the collapse of the socialist regime, *Slovo* was generally seen as Válek's desperate attempt to demonstrate that a true poet can unite ideological norms with freedom of creativity, and truth with lies (Štrasser 1993: 2). These words express the general atmosphere surrounding Válek after his death, which is best embodied by the opposition of truthfulness and dishonesty. At the turn of the millennium, interest in Válek was gradually renewing. As the literary scholar Pavel Matejovič aptly put it, the author's work is not marked by schisms (of life and work, or of the intimate and the social), but by a peculiar integrity of seemingly disjointed elements (Matejovič 2004: 44). Besides this, two distinct attitudes towards Válek emerged after 2000 that do not necessarily dictate his position in the canon, but most vividly represent its uncertainty and complexity. The literary scholars Valér Mikula and Ján Zambor, two prominent post-socialist Válek scholars, published their interpretations of Válek's debut *Dotyky* in tandem in 2002 with radically different approaches. While Zambor interprets the first part of the book, composed of an intimate and private short lyric, Mikula provides a reading of the second part of the book, consisting of more loosely composed, lengthier poems that have palpable social or historicising overtones.

Zambor's approach to Válek is hermeneutic: his interpretations follow the text and its form closely, sometimes rigidly, focusing almost exclusively on the poet's shorter poetry thematically tied to his 'poetic' face with the themes of love, miscommunication, alienation or disillusion. Zambor's monograph on Válek (2013) is a prime example of a cautious reading to preserve an uncontaminated image: in the opening summary of the poet's work, the critic briefly mentions Válek's socially charged poetry, dedicating a mere paragraph to *Slovo*, labelling it as a propaganda text that simplifies the vision of the world into a trace of communist ideology (Zambor 2013: 25). The other approach, represented by Mikula, does not separate the poet from the politician and his era. Quite the contrary, Mikula, who edited the only book of Válek's collected works after 1989, deems Válek's pre-debut poetry published in magazines best in the afterword, due to its unsolvable and uncertain life situations, subtle poetic virtuosity, honest helplessness and indecisiveness (Mikula 2005). Mikula goes even further, noting that Válek's poetry presents 'refined emotions, an ambiguity of sadistic humiliation and masochistic self-deprecation, violence and self-torture, blind masculine power and intellectual self-contempt' (Mikula 2009: 102), and suggests that a great portion of Válek's poetry encodes the official ideological

basis and poetics of Socialist Realism, and aestheticises them into a more artistic neo-Modernist form. In a more concrete example, Mikula emphasises the motif of the ‘white lie’ in Válek’s early work regarding intimate relationships, a lie that gradually grew into the self-sacrificing and socially honourable mechanism of *Slovo* and his political career (Mikula 2002: 29).

In this respect, Válek’s body of work is subject to the social value of judgements, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1991) describes it: thus, the axiological value of *Slovo* to the socialist canon is rooted in literary critics declaring its complexity and the truthfulness of the poem, but in the post-socialist canon these categories are completely reversed into a different extreme of surface-level ideology and dishonesty.

Conclusion

Válek continues to fascinate, as is evidenced by at least two theatre plays that portray him as a controversial figure during Normalisation, a theatrically released documentary (*Válek*, 2017) on his multi-faceted but still relatively unknown life, and by special issues of newspapers commemorating the author. The poet’s important place in the canon is indisputable: the issue with readers and scholars is the politician. It seems more fitting to regard Válek, as Matejovič proposed, as the type of East European intellectual that Czesław Miłosz described in relation to the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski: one ‘impelled toward self-annihilation’ (Miłosz 1955: 125). In Válek’s case, this would include not only the common narrative of the perceived self-sacrifice for the greater good, to mitigate the possible damage that could be done at the ministerial post by someone less interested and invested in culture, but also the notion of Válek fully committing himself to the socialist cause and policies to avoid possible confrontation with the meaninglessness of existence that he at times expressed with unprecedented precision in his poetry.

What was seen in the socialist literary canon as the highest instance of creativity, the synthesis of the individual and the social, which Válek himself strove to fulfil, is, in Zambor’s view, an unwanted but easily avoidable contamination of the poet’s work with incompatible values. In Mikula’s view, it is an unavoidable interplay of naturally intertwined facets of the poet’s existence, but judged harshly and unforgivingly in conjunction with his political activities: the more unavoidable

it is, the more it should be accentuated. Both views implicitly refer to what is often perceived as contamination or an annoying flaw in the poet's work (Matejovič 2004: 44). One view deems Válek worthy of being canonical, and sees his political writings and career as a flaw that should be avoided, so as not to contaminate the canonical poet. The other sees only a minute portion of Válek's work as canon-worthy, with the political elements contaminating not his own work but literature and culture as such. The 'dialectics of nausea and attraction' (Andraščík 1966: 24) is still present in the Slovak perception of the controversial poet. However, it is the 'attraction' that survives to this day, most palpably with the general and professional readership: as far as canons go, it is a testament to the value of perceived universality that often allows a work and its author to enter a canon.

The problem with the continuation of the socialist literary canon into the post-socialist literary canon is well demonstrated by the prominent example of Válek. Although he is one of many, even in Slovak literature, no other writer of the socialist era comes close to him in terms of the unresolved tension in his work and the uncertainty of its (honest, utilitarian, and even ironic) reading, nor with the actual influence on culture and politics that he used to have. It is possible to delimit three stages in Válek's reception: the first when he was seen as a seminal neo-Modernist poet of inner turmoil; the second seeing him as a primarily social and political poet in conjunction with his political position; and the third stage would logically invite a synthesis of the two. However, my conclusion is rather anticlimactic: it would be inaccurate to generalise what Válek's status is today in the literary consciousness, but his lengthy politically charged poems, as well as his actual political writing and activities, remain under-researched and marginalised, or simply demonised, which can be attributed to a certain distaste for an uncomfortable part of Slovak history. The separation of the lyric poet and the political poet or politician has long been implicitly present in Slovak literature through new editions of his works. The selections are either focused on his intimate lyric, or they circumvent his politically charged verse, especially *Slovo*. The editor of a 2001 edition of *Milovanie v husej koži* decided to include several older poems in the book, admitting in the afterword that Válek's poetry ends for him with *Slovo* (Matejov 2001). As Matejovič posited, Válek's flaws and tensions have no solution; thus, in my opinion, if a poet of Válek's cultural and political significance should be canonical, then it is with everything at hand, with his virtues and vices, with his authenticity and dishonesty, with both his 'truths' and 'lies'.

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